

Νά εὕχεται νά ἴναι μακρὺς ὁ δρόμος:

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON PILGRIMAGE

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From the fourth century onwards, pilgrimage became one of the best-attested forms of Christian devotion. Before that, we are hampered by lack of evidence, though there is a little evidence to suggest that Christians made their way to the Holy Land on what we must regard as pilgrimage in the third century<sup>1</sup>, but so long as Christians were a persecuted sect in the Roman Empire it is not likely that pilgrimage was anything but occasional. But from the fourth century onwards, there is ample evidence of pilgrimage, first of all to the Holy Land, then to great centres of Christianity such as Rome and, later, Constantinople, and then to what we might call provincial, regional, or even local centres of pilgrimage, of which the most notable—which we must call at least provincial—were Seleucia in Isauria, with its shrine of St Thekla, the shrines of SS. Kyros and John, and of St Menas in Lower Egypt, the shrine built around the pillar on which St Symeon Stylites had prayed, and—a little later, but more enduring—the shrine of St Demetrios here in Thessaloniki. The evidence for such pilgrimage varies: only comparatively rarely, particularly in comparison with the West, do we find literary accounts (what were to be called later, in Greek, *προσκυνητήρια*) of such pilgrimage, and these mainly relate to the great centres of pilgrimage, especially to the Holy Land. But we are much better provided with material evidence, principally in the form of pilgrim

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1. See E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, p. 4.

tokens: cameos, ampullæ, reliquaries. Let us begin our reflection on the Church of St Demetrios as a pilgrim shrine with a brief look at the surviving pilgrim tokens from that shrine.

Several of these have been recently displayed at exhibitions of Byzantine art held throughout the world. For instance, at the exhibition, *The Glory of Byzantium*<sup>2</sup>, held in New York last year, there were several examples of such tokens. One was a pilgrim's ampulla (cat. no. 118): made of lead, dated to the 13th century, with St Demetrios depicted on one side, and on the other, either St Theodora of Thessaloniki or the Mother of God in an attitude of prayer. The ampulla would have contained *μύρον* from the *μυρόβλητος* icon of St Demetrios. Such a lead ampulla would have been a token for a pilgrim of quite modest means. Two other exhibits at that exhibition (cat. nos. 116, 117) would have been much more costly: reliquaries in gold and cloisonné enamel. Both of them were enkolpia and had depicted on the front icons of, in one case, St George and, in the other case, St Demetrios – the icon of St George is a later addition, presumably to replace an original icon of St Demetrios that had become detached. But the enkolpia opened up, and inside both of them had icons of a recumbent St Demetrios under a ciborium, as in the shrine at Thessaloniki, and inscriptions that make plain that the enkolpia contained blood and oil from the *μυρόβλητος* icon of St Demetrios, together with a prayer for protection. It seems very likely that these enkolpia belonged to high-ranking Byzantine soldiers, who had made a pilgrimage to Thessaloniki to seek the protection of the great defender of the city, St Demetrios. Another similar enkolpion, displayed at the exhibition in New York (cat. no. 108), depicted, also in gold and cloisonné enamel, the two saints Demetrios and Nestor on front and back: it was part of the booty brought back to the West – by the bishop of Halberstadt! – after the treacherous Fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople. Other pilgrim tokens that survive are cameos, one of which was displayed in this city last year in the exhibition of «Treasures from Mount Athos» (cat. no. 9. 13)<sup>3</sup>. This deep-blue, nearly circular cameo, depicting St Demetrios with a shield and short lance, is one of around twenty similar cameos made from the same mould, now in museums around the world. Such mass-produced, glass paste cameos were clearly inexpensive tokens bought by pilgrims at the shrine in Thessaloniki. Just one last example: very much a luxury item, exhibited in the New York last year

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2. Catalogue: *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine era AD 843-1261*, ed. by Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997.

3. Catalogue: *Treasures of Mount Athos*, Thessaloniki, 1997.

(cat. no. 36). This was a miniature copy of the shrine of St Demetrios, with a panel with the SS. Nestor and Louros, and on the other side a panel with Christ crowning the Emperor Constantine X Doukas and his wife, Eudokia Makrembolitissa; the inscription records all this, and asserts that it is a 'true image (σάφης τύπος) of the ciborium of the lance-pierced martyr Demetrios' and was made for John Autoreianos, a high-ranking courtier. Originally, this reliquary contained a smaller box, now at the Great Lavra on Mount Athos (and therefore not displayed here last year), which was apparently the real reliquary which fitted inside the silver-gilt copy of the shrine: its inscription tells us that it contained the sacred blood of the martyr Demetrios, which «*confirmed John's divine faith and deep desire*». The catalogue entry makes the plausible suggestion that this reliquary was given to the imperial couple by John after Constantine fell ill in 1066, and entrusted the rule of the empire to his wife, Eudokia, whom Michael Psellos regarded as «*the wisest woman of her time*». If so, we are to think of John making pilgrimage to Thessaloniki and bringing back the small reliquary, which he presented within the miniature copy of the shrine, in the hope that the emperor might be healed by the intercession of St Demetrios. But Constantine died the following year.

These remaining witnesses to the pilgrimage cult of St Demetrios in the first half of the present millennium (the earliest is the reliquary we have just discussed, which must belong to the 1060s, the others probably belong to the 13th or 14th century) give us some impression of what was sought by pilgrims: healing and protection from the martyr saint who had so notably protected the city of Thessaloniki from the Slavs and Avars at the end of the sixth and the seventh century. The provenance of these relics also yields, a little information about who the pilgrims were. The cameos are now all over the world: it is possible that originally they were all taken from Thessaloniki to another part of the Byzantine world. But that is, I think, unlikely: it is more probable that they bear witness to pilgrimage to Thessaloniki from both East and West, as the title of our conference suggests. But the reliquary we have just discussed is now in Moscow. By what route it found its way there we do not know, but it reminds us of the links between Thessaloniki and Russia, links that go back to the creation of Slavonic as a literary language and the beginnings of mission to the Slavs by those two sons of this city, Constantine/Cyril and his brother Methodius. The very popularity of the name Dimitry in Russia suggests that Thessaloniki was a place of pilgrimage for Russians. Indeed, the only literary account of pilgrimage to Thessaloniki in medieval times of which I am aware is the account by Ignaty of Smolensk of his pilgrimage to Mount Athos and Thessaloniki in 1405. It is a disappointing account, nothing more than an itinerary<sup>4</sup>; but

nonetheless it reminds us that the Church of St Demetrios was *προσκύνημα ἀνατολῆς καὶ δύσεως καὶ βοριᾶ*.

Pilgrims came, we have seen, to seek healing and protection at the shrine of St Demetrios, and to take from the shrine his continuing protection: one of the inscriptions prays for the Saint's help in life and in death. But pilgrims came, and they went. Pilgrimage is not just the goal, the shrine; it is also the way – the way there and the way back. These two aspects of pilgrimage are brought out in the different words for pilgrimage in Greek and in Latin. In Greek we say *προσκύνημα* (or, in Byzantine Greek, *προσκύνησις*); in Latin the word is *peregrinatio*. The Greek word points to the pilgrim's goal: the reverencing or veneration of the sacred place, or relics, to which his pilgrimage leads. But the Latin word points to the state of being a pilgrim: a *peregrinus* was an alien, a foreigner, someone who did not belong, who was only passing through; the corresponding word in Greek would be *ξένος*. So in its root meaning *peregrinatio* corresponds less to the word *προσκύνημα*, than to the word *ξενιτεία*. We need to understand both these aspects if we are to grasp the nature of pilgrimage. A pilgrim goes somewhere, but to go there he leaves his home, his settled society, he becomes a stranger, a *ξένος*, in the regions he passes through; at the shrine, the goal of his pilgrimage, he meets others who have made themselves *ξένοι*, he shares with them in his veneration of the saint or the shrine or the place, and then they return, each to their own home, altered by the sacredness they have encountered at the place they have visited<sup>5</sup>.

The whole process – the going away and the coming back – is necessary: you cannot be a pilgrim to your home – you belong there, there you are not a *ξένος*. What is the point of becoming a *ξένος*? We can see this by recalling two passages from the New Testament. First, Christ's words: «*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head*» (Matt. 8. 20). The Incarnation was an act of *ξενιτεία*: in becoming man, Christ entered into a far country, human society fallen and turned away from God; and those who follow him, those who respond to his call to repentance, *μετάνοια*, follow him into a state of *ξενιτεία*, a condition in which they are no longer at home in this world. The other passage is from the Epistle to the Hebrews: «*These all died in faith, ... having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles – ξένοι καὶ πα-*

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4. See George P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* XIX, Washington DC: 1984, p. 55.

5. This account of pilgrimage is based on that given by Vincent and Edith Turner in their book, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, though I have not used their technical language.

ροπίδημοι – on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city» (Heb. 11. 13- 16). Living in faith is to acknowledge that you are a ξένος; being a pilgrim is what it is to live by faith, so it follows that physical, spatial pilgrimage is simply to externalize –to «live out», as we say in English—the inward reality of what it is to be a Christian, living in faith, following Christ. Setting out from home, the pilgrim moves away from the familiar to the unfamiliar; he learns to see things with new eyes; one can speak of «cleansing the doors of perception»<sup>6</sup>, so that even familiar things appear in a new light to the pilgrim. That idea of passing to a new place, seeing things in a new light, recalls a phrase that will be familiar to us all: Τῆς μετανόιας ἄνοιξόν μοι πύλας, Ζωοδότα. Each Sunday in Lent we sing those words at Orthros, for each Lent we set out on a journey, treading a path that we can only reach by passing through the gates of repentance. Each Lent Orthodox Christians are invited to make their own that ξενιτεία that lies at the heart of the monastic life. For pilgrimage is more than spatial pilgrimage –the journey to another place, a sacred place—to be a real pilgrimage it must also further that inner journey that we make in the course of our life, a journey that we have to begin again and again, as we seek to make our way through the gates of repentance.

These are then the two sides of pilgrimage: the place sought out, the shrine, the place where events took place, where physical, historical relics are to be found, where, to borrow a phrase from T.S. Eliot, «prayer has been valid». That is one pole of pilgrimage: it witnesses to the historical events with which Christianity is bound up, preeminently the historical events of the life, death and resurrection of the Incarnate Son of God, but also the historical events of those in whom the grace of the resurrection was manifest. This historical dimension calls for faith, acknowledgment, reverence, προσκύνησις. But the other pole is the journey we need to make: need to make for us to be able to make a true προσκύνησις of the heart. For this journey works an inner transformation, and involves an inner journey, even more than an outer journey, though the outer journey is often necessary. It is the journey of the life of each one of us, and a journey that is pressing – we must not linger on the way. Early Greek Christians saw a prefiguration of that sense of life as an urgent journey, full of dangers and distractions, in Homer's *Odyssey*<sup>7</sup>: Odysseus prefigured both Christ, in his journey into a far country to save us, and Christians, in their

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6. A phrase used by the Turners, op. cit., p. 11.

journey to their distant homeland. Cavafy, in his poem *Ἰθάκη*, makes the same link, seeing in the *Odyssey* the journey which is our life. He is perhaps too inclined to linger on the way, and to make of the goal a mere pretext for a journey. But nonetheless we may make his words ours:

νὰ εὐχέσαι νὰ ἴναι μακρὸς ὁ δρόμος,  
γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.

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7. See Hugo Rahner's «Holy Homer», published in English as Part III of his *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, London: Burns & Oates, 1963, pp. 283-386.